DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 251 818 CS 007 877

AUTHOR Gutknecht, Bruce
TITLE The Doctor Is In: Practical Answers to Perplexing Questions about Classroom Reading Instruction.
PUB DATE 8 May 84
NOTE 19p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the International Reading Association (29th, Atlanta, GA, May 6-10, 1984).
PUB TYPE Guides - Classroom Use - Guides (For Teachers) (052) -- Information Analyses (070) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Basic Skills; *Classroom Techniques; Content Area Reading; *Educational Theories; Elementary Secondary Education; *Reading Instruction; Reading Material Selection; *Reading Research; Reading Skills; Teaching Methods; *Time Management
IDENTIFIERS *Theory Practice Relationship

ABSTRACT

To address the gap perceived by classroom reading teachers between research findings and reading process theories and the realities of classroom reading instruction, this paper poses six questions/problems often asked by reading teachers, and answers them with information drawn from current research and theory. Topics covered in the questions concern (1) the use of ditto sheets, (2) basic skills instruction, (3) motivating children to read, (4) the use of children's literature in reading instruction, (5) content area reading, and (6) classroom time management. The paper concludes that reading teachers should become familiar with current research and theory, but should not hesitate to question suggestions made by researchers and theoreticians about reading instruction. (FL)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION
CENTER (ERIC)
X This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official NIE position or policy.

ED251818

THE DOCTOR IS IN: PRACTICAL ANSWERS TO PERPLEXING QUESTIONS ABOUT CLASSROOM READING INSTRUCTION

A paper presented at the International Reading Association Convention, May 8, 1984, Atlanta, GA

Dr. Bruce Gutknecht
University of North Florida

INTRODUCTION: People involved in research in the field of reading are often the recipients of criticism by classroom teachers because of a perceived gap between research findings and classroom application of the findings. Much of such criticism is justified. In addition, classroom teachers are often at a loss in relating theoretical models of the reading process to classroom practice.

This paper addresses these concerns through the presentation of several very real classroom reading instructional problems/questions along with suggested solutions/answers based on current research findings and/or established theory. The issues addressed include instructional management, basic skills instruction, children's literature and instructional practices.

CS 007 877

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
Bruce Gutknecht
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

PROBLEM/QUESTION: For some time now I've been hearing a lot of criticism of teachers who use dittos in much of their teaching. One teacher I know says that he doesn't have time to continually think up new activities for his students because he is too busy teaching, testing, and keeping the records for the basic skills. So he uses lots of dittos. Another teacher told me tnat tne parents or several of her first-graders expressed dissatisfaction with her teaching because their children didn't bring home a ditto every day. Now, I'm beginning to wonder about my own use of dittos. Pretty regularly, I have my class working on dittos while I'm working with individual students or with a small group. Am I wrong?

SOLUTION/ANSWER: No, you're not wrong! But that "no" must be qualified. In teaching, as in much of life, there are very few "yes" or "no" answers. Rather, there are many shades or gray - or in this case purple. The question really isn't "Should I use dittos or shouldn't I?" but "HOW should I use dittos?" An exploration of the reasons for using dittos will lead to the answer.

But first please realize that in an enterprise as large as education there are as many practices (methods, approaches,

etc.) and many opinions on the effect of these practices. For example, heterogeneous and homogeneous grouping have been discussed for years. Phonetic analysis versus a look-say (sight word) approach received much debate following the establishment of this strawman by Jeanne Chall in her book READING, THE GREAT DEBATE. Teachers, administrators, and reading specialists argue the merits of one set of basal readers over another. So remember that just as many points can be made for a certain practice as can be made against it.

The reason the first teacher you described gave for using dittos was that he didn't have time to develop activities because of his heavy involvement in teaching the basic skills. It is generally becoming accepted that the basic skills education that all teachers have been involved with for the last several years has worked. Children are learning the basic skills better than ever before. However, application of the skills now needs more attention.

Application of skills develops when the student can relate a skill or skills to his/her own experiences and conceptual background and to real-life situations in which s/he is interested. These conditions (relation to experiences, conceptual background, and real-life interesting situations) must be met for any real learning to take place. If a ditto, a game, a story in a basal reader, an audio tape, or a piece of

computer software meets these conditions, it will help the student learn. If it doesn't, it won't help at all. It is important for the teacher with the shortage of time described above to carefully select the dittos he uses so they meet these conditions. Then, they wil be useful in the teaching-learning process. Of course, all techers should carefully select not only dittos, but games, basal reader stories, audio tapes, and computer software to meet these conditions all the time.

The teacher wno was criticized because her pupils weren't bringing home a ditto every night needs to remember that most parents are concerned about how their children are doing in school. Of course good teachers know that success in school isn't measured in quantities or dittos. What is needed in this situation is improved communication with parents about the progress or their children. It wouldn't hurt to remind parents that it isn't materials (dittos or any others) that do the teaching, but rather the interaction of teacher and pupil.

Finally, dittos for busy-work are less than desirable. But then, most forms of busy-work are less than desirable. If students need to be occupied for a period of time, what would be better than reading? Reading a book or a story related to a person's experiences, conceptual background, and interests not only will occupy time, but will lead to improved application of the skills.

OK to use dittos? Of course! Dittos, basal reader stories, games, and indeed any material or activity are OK to use. But they must be carefully selected and appropriately used.

PROBLEM/QUESTION: My students are learning the basic reading skills very well. I spend most of my preparation and reading instructional time in determining which skills each of my students have mastered and then working with them in learning new skills. As "traditional" as it may sound, my students do fit into three groups for skill instruction. However, I sense two problems.

First, my students seem to be bored and uninterested in reading much of the time, but I can't blame them. I'm also bored with endless skill instruction. Secondly, from the reading in professional journals that I've done and from my own feelings, I know that skill acquisition is not the end goal of reading. I know that application of the skills leading to comprehension of the written materials should be the goal. But I don't have enough time to get at this important goal because of the skill instruction that I must do.

SOLUTION/ANSWER: The problems you've described are faced by most teachers. But you're one up on many teachers because you realize that reading skills are just means to the end, or tools

to be used to move to the only real goal of reading, comprehension of the message of the writer.

First or all, consider some of the factors that make something boring and uninteresing: lack of experiential and/or conceptual background , lack or interest in a topic, something less than a positive attitude, inadequate skills with which to learn about a topic. The factors not only affect your children in school, but they affect even us as adults. Another very important idea to consider is that as humans, we like to see and feel most comfortable with wholeness or completeness.

Remember the story of the six blind men and the elephant? Each of them only learned about part of the elephant, and so imagined the elephant to be quite different from what the total elephant really was. In fact, when the parts of the elephant imagined by the six blind men were put together, they still didn't describe the whole elephant as it really was. The lesson from that story could be that parts of an elephant aren't as good as the whole elephant. Let's see if this same idea might apply to the problem of boredom and lack of interest in the teaching/learning of reading.

Skill based instruction tends to isolate various pieces of the reading process. The smaller the pieces are, the more abstract they become, and their relation to the whole becomes less

clear. Even if a student is interested in and has a good attitude toward a certain topic, and has the necessary experiential and conceptual background, the fact that isolated skill instruction causes one to lose sight of the whole process and its goal of comprehension, is enough of a problem to cause boredom and lack of interest. Think about this example.

Tim, a fourth-grader, is very interested in building model airplanes. In fact, he wants to enter one in competition that his Cub Scout troop is sponsoring. One of the skills required in model building is the gluing of individual parts. If Tim were required to practice gluing techniques over and over and over again, he could lose interest in model building and easily become bored.

In reading, then, drilling specific isolated, and often abstract skills over and over and over again can cause students to lose sight of the whole -- the understanding of the message the writer wants to communicate. This easily causes boredom and lack of interest.

What's one solution to this problem? Start with the whole instead of the isolated pieces. Make sure that the whole is within the experiential and conceptual background of the students. If the topic of the whole reading selection is of interest to the students, they will have a positive attitude

toward learning it. This suggestion may sound contrary to the way reading instruction is usually approached and the way reading instructional materials are developed for classroom utilization. But starting off with the whole of the reading process, using whole, natural language, will assist students who have a hard time seeing the relationship between the whole and its parts. From this base, it is then easy to proceed with specific skill instruction when, and for whom it is necessary.

This solution, by the way, is also the answer to the second problem you stated above, the problem of not enough time for skill instruction and for instruction in the application of the skills. By starting with the whole, students are able to see the application of specific skills. So skill instruction should not be viewed as something to be done separately from instruction in the application of the skills. These two things should be coupled together.

If these suggestions are followed, the result will not only be economy of time, but students who develop a positive attitude for and interest in learning to read.

PROBLEM/QUESTION: During the past nine years I've been teaching in the primary grades. When I started teaching, the basal readers we used were rather dull and my students weren't too interested in them. Because of declining reading test scores,

we added a phonics workbook. This didn't help matters as far as motivation was concerned. About four years ago, the "back to basics" movement with all of its objectives and testing began. This didn't do anything to help make the teaching of reading interesting; in fact, more or my students got "turned off" because reading became a series of tests and drills. What do you think is going to come along next in reading education, and will it help at all in what I consider my biggest job -- getting my students interested in learning to read?

SOLUTION/ANSWER: Yes, providing motivation for children in learning to read has been and still is a major problem for teachers. The newer basal readers have become a little better with more interesting stories, appealing to a wider range of children. But the "back to basics" style of education prevalent in most schools today has taken the joy out of learning for many teachers and children.

Reading in the 80's will bring some new challenges and yes, there is hope that the next emphasis, at least from my perspective, will provide the opportunity for teachers to capture the interest of their students.

The professional literature in reading education has been reflecting more and more in recent months the idea that the "basics" movement has peaked. It appears that testing and

accountability, and objective-based skill instruction has indeed done what it was supposed to do. Test scores are up, school systems are boasting about educational gains, and many parents are once again believing that education is getting back to what it was in the "good old days."

Well, that was the good news! Here's the not-so-good. While more students are receiving the checkmarks on their tracking cards for having passed minimal skills and district and state assessment tests are reporting gains, children are still appearing in the upper elementary, middle, junior high and senior high schools who can "read" the social studies or science textbook, but still don't understand it.

While reading skills have been taught and learned and checked off, this has often been in an isolated or abstract manner. Reading is a complex process and real reading is more than the sum of its individual skills.

Reading in the 80's, I feel will involve an emphasis on the application of the skills learned in the "basics" type of education. Remember, the application or use of a skill is much more important than the ability to state the definition or to demonstrate the skill on an isolated test item.

Application of the skills of reading will involve teachers in

helping students relate to topics which they are working on to their experiences, their interests, and their conceptual backgrounds. And anything that becomes this personal to a student is bound to help with motivation for learning. In the past four or five years, we've taught the skills, and we taught them well. During the next four or five years, we'll teach the child, basing instruction on interests, experiences, and concepts.

Reading exists not as an end in itself, but as a tool which children and adults use for gaining information and recreation, and a variety of other purposes. Now that the basic skills are coming along fairly well, let's help children use them.

PROBLEM/QUESTION: I know there are many wonderful stories and books written for children, but I just don't have time to use them. Because of all the time I need to prepare my students to meet our grade level objectives and to pass the State Assessment Test, and to cover the basal reader levels assigned to me, I don't have time to involve my children in good children's literature.

SOLUTION/ANSWER: This is a problem faced by most teachers in the primary and intermediate grades. We want to involve our students in good literature, but we are responsible for skill development using required instructional materials. While Dick,

Jane, and Spot have been replaced by Alice and Jerry, and more recently by Jill, Ben, and Lad, things haven't changed much in terms of the materials we are required to use. But they've changed some.

All stories included in recently published basal readers are not of the house written variety and many fine pieces of literature written by noted children's authors are finding their way into the materials.

What is needed by teachers is a perspective about the reading process that includes the use of good literature in the development of essential reading skills. What is important to remember is that the language process called reading has but one purpose, that is to serve for communication between author and reader. Comprehension of the message of the author is helped greatly if the concepts (ideas) written about by the author are within the parameters of the experiential background and interests of the reader.

In other words, if learning to read isn't working with the aid of Jill, Ben, and Lad maybe it will work better with the aid of Laura Ingalls and John-Boy. There is no reading skill (phonetic analysis, word processing, vocabulary, comprehension, or study) that cannot be taught and learned using good, real children's literature.

So, instead of viewing use of children's literature as supplemental, it should be viewed as a basic tool in reading, teaching and learning. In addition, the practice of reading good literature to students on almost any level should be continued and encouraged because the teacher's ability to model good reading of interesting materials will help to motivate reading learners.

Use good children's literature in reading instruction. With it you can teach the skills and keep the readers interested in learning to read.

PROBLEM/QUESTION: My 4th grade students do quite will in their reading skills. They recognize many words, apply their word processing (structural analysis, etc.) and phonetic analysis skills, and make very few oral reading errors. But, when they read from their social studies textbook, they just don't understand what the author is trying to say. What's the problem?

SOLUTION/ANSWER: The real problem here centers on the ultimate goal of learning to read, or rather, on what the ultimate goal should be. The ultimate goal of learning to read should be for the reader to comprehend or understand the message of the writer (author). All reading skills instruction should lead

toward this goal. Unfortunately it doesn't.

Another way of looking at this problem is for you to ask yourself the question: Which is more important, knowledge of a reading skill or the application of that skill?

Many beginning reading materials and instructional methods tend to treat acquisition of reading skills as ends in themselves, rather than tools to be applied in the search for meaning. Readers are led to believe that if they can divide words into syllables, and/or if they can apply prefixes without error that's all there is to reading.

The purpose of language and its processes (speaking, listening, writing, and reading) is for communication between sender (writer, speaker) and receiver (listener, reader). This communication involves the transmission of thoughts or ideas (concepts). Sounds, syllables, letters, and even words are only the means used to carry on the communication. They are not the communication itself.

Sounds, syllables, letters, and even words have no meaning in themselves. They are only pieces of the oral or written code used to transmit meaning. As pieces, they are abstract, and often isolated bits of the language. Teachers and schools most often do a good job of teaching these bits and pieces. Most

often students do a good job of learning them.

So how do we solve the problem?

1. Remember that the ulitmate goal of reading is to understand the meaning of the author.

2. Remember that the skills of reading are only tools used to gain that meaning and that application of the skill is what's important.

3. Finally, remember that since the skills often involve bits and pieces of the language that are abstract and isolated, teachers and students need to make an erfort to use them in a whole-language meaningful context.

When instruction is planned and implemented with these thoughts in mind, the readers will be able to use their skill abilities in meeting the goal of reading -- understanding the meaning.

PROBLEM/QUESTION: Recently our school district adopted one basal reading system to be used in all elementary schools. The materials do not have grade level designations, but instead, there are 18 levels to be used in Kindergarten through grade 6. Up until this point, teachers did their own thing, with many using the language experience approach. We are supposed to

individualize our reading instruction, so that when a student finishes one level, s/he moves directly into the next level. This has presented a terrible problem, because out of 26 students, 17 of them might be at different places in the materials at the same time. What can we do?

SOLUTION/ANSWER: This problem really involves consideration of a continuum of instructional methods, with individual instruction on one end and grouping on the other end.

individual
instruction grouping

X_____X

For many years, grouping was the instructional method found in most elementary classrooms for reading instruction. Students were grouped typically into three groups made up of average, below average, and above average readers. These groups had a variety of names such as bluebirds, eagles, hawks, etc. A few problems were generated by grouping.

Often, the measurement and evaluation of reading abilities that preceeded placing the students into groups was meager, at best. Once a student was placed into a group and labeled, s/he was likely to remain in that group forever. Sometimes, the self-concept of the student was hurt because of the group s/he

was placed in.

Individualization, on the other hand, has been often misunderstood. Many teachers think that individualization means that instruction must proceed always on a one-to-one basis. This isn't really the case. Individualization should rather be viewed as the providing of instruction appropriate to the needs of each individual child.

Given this definition, individualization may involve group instruction. However, the composition of the groups may vary from time to time, and the once-a-bluebird-always-a-bluebird syndrome won't be in operation. This application of individualization and grouping can be used for reading skills instruction as well as dealing with students on various levels in the reading instructional materials.

One suggestion that can work effectively in managing continuous progress individualization and grouping involves proceeding unit by unit through the instructional materials. Let's say that students in the classroom are in seven different places in the materials. The teacher introduces the next seven units to the groups of students in each unit. The students preceed to work through the units. For the students who finish first, rather than moving right on to the next unit, they participate in supplemental work on the same level. When most of the

students have completed the units in which they were working, the teacher deals with the end-of-the-unit activities and then introduces the next units. Because some of the students will not have completed the units, they will remain working, and composition of the groups will change.

This built-in holding pattern will minimize instructional efforts by limiting the number of times the teacher must introduce and conclude each unit. Most important, each child will be receiving instruction appropriate to his/her needs.

CONCLUSION/SUMMARY: It has been the purpose of this paper to address the gap perceived by classroom reading teachers between research findings and reading process theories, and the realities of classroom reading instruction. Solutions/answers based in research findings and theoretical models were suggested for several very real classroom reading instructional problems/questions.

Reading teachers should develop familiarity with current research and reading process theories, and should not hesitate to question suggestions made by researchers and theoreticians about reading instruction. In so doing, they will be able to answer the question "Why?" in terms of their instructional practices. Quality instruction demands that teachers not only know what to do and how to do it, but to know why they are doing it.